

Navy Frigate Turns Into Near-Legend

Editor's Note. — A frigate, according to traditional definition, was a medium-sized sailing man-of-war. The Navy reincarnated the term for its new breed of cruiser-size destroyer leaders. Some of the new frigates are already near-legends. This is the sixth in a series of articles on the Pacific Fleet Cruiser-Destroyer Force.

By BOB DIETRICH

Lt. (jg) Donald A. Griswold, 25, communications officer of the guided missile frigate Coontz, is the kind of young college-trained American the Navy likes to employ in assignments of seemingly overwhelming responsibility.

Griswold has a degree in agricultural business management from California Polytechnic Institute at San Luis Obispo.

Aboard the Coontz he has learned to become: a navigator, a battle-tested combat information center officer, a crypto (code) specialist and charity officer.

The Coontz was commissioned in 1960. She is designated a DLG (for destroyer leader, guided missile). The Navy now calls them frigates. It is the ideal type of ship for the current generation of junior officers.

Fight in 3 Dimensions

Frigates fight in three dimensions — anti-air, anti-surface and anti-submarine. They are about as big as World War II light cruisers.

The Pacific Fleet Cruiser-Destroyer Force (CruDesPac) has 14 of them.

Griswold, who wants to go into the livestock industry after his Navy tour ends, has been involved in plenty of action — the kind that won the Coontz the Navy Unit Commendation.

He remembers the dawn hours of June 14, 1966 in the Tonkin Gulf. Coontz's radar had picked up two flying "bogeys" heading for Yankee Station from North Vietnam.

Identified as MIGs

After stabbing out electronic alerts to the carrier task force ships, Coontz radarmen "took control" of two Navy F4 Phantom fighter-bombers. The bogeys were identified as MIGs.

A Sparrow air-to-air missile from one to the Phantoms eliminated one MIG; the other MIG accelerated for home.

"Coontz Terrier missiles could have bagged them if necessary," said Griswold.

The Coontz is armed with a twin Terrier launcher, one five-inch and two three-inch guns, plus anti-submarine rockets and homing torpedoes. She also is a mini aircraft carrier, with a flight deck for an H2 Sea Sprite helicopter. The helo is used for long-range search and rescue missions.

Frigates are 512 feet long, displace 5,700 tons and can exceed 32 knots.

Stresses Communication Communications is Griswold's most recent job. He considers it most important.

"If you can't talk to the other units nobody can do what they're supposed to do," he said.

"We've detected 'jamming' attempts by North Vietnamese, but they stopped once they found our direction finders were fingering them."

Cessation of jamming, was, presumably, self-preservation. Carrier aircraft could have easily found the Communist transmitters.

Action in a unique blend of old and new techniques came Coontz way in July 1966.

Her radar detected high-speed surface movement coming toward her and several nearby warships. The contact was evaluated as three North Vietnamese torpedo boats, which could be carrying Styx missiles.

Torpedo Boats Stopped

Coontz and her brood took evasive action after flashing alerts to distant carriers. Once again, Coontz radarmen guided Navy fighters to the target.

Two of the three torpedo boats were blown out of the water. The third was still afloat when Coontz and her sister frigate, King, came to racing halts nearby. Both DLGs lowered whaleboats loaded with armed sailors.

Attempts to salvage the badly turning third torpedo boat failed. Survivors of the three enemy boats fought hand-to-hand in the water with Coontz and King sailors. Sixteen of the North Vietnamese navymen were finally captured.

Coontz and her sister frigates have helped create a legend for the new warship class. More about them will be told in an article on their work in rescuing downed pilots under the noses of the enemy.

Tomorrow: How CruDesPac's three nuclear men-of-war work.

